Insights into gratitude from open-ended qualitative interviews

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Statement

I declare that this thesis is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it does not contain material from published sources without proper acknowledgement, nor does it contain material which has been accepted for the award of any other higher degree or graduate diploma in any university.

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Abstract

Research within the relatively new scientific field of gratitude has rapidly expanded over the last decade and a half, inspired by strong positive links with well-being and mental health. There is currently a lack of consensus as to how the term gratitude is defined and conceptualised, and the field lacks a solid theoretical basis. The aim of the current project was to obtain a deeper understanding of the experiences or things for which people are grateful, and the underlying cognitive processes which underpin their gratitude experience. Open ended qualitative interviews were conducted individually with 12 undergraduate students. Participants were asked to talk about "things or experiences" which they considered beneficial. To reduce the likelihood of socially desirable responding, the terms "gratitude" and "appreciation" were not used. Thematic analysis revealed three main domains in which gratitude was experienced: Close Personal Relationships (including sub themes of Family and Friends); Adversity and Personal Change (including sub themes of Self and Others); and Self Development Pursuits. Within these themes, the capacity for gratitude to change over time was apparent. Exploration of the specific cognitive appraisals associated with participants' gratitude experiences led to the modification and extension of an existing model of gratitude. The modified model represents the cognitive appraisals which can underpin the experience of general gratitude, and is not limited to prototypical gratitude which involves the deliberate act of another. The model can also account for changes in gratitude over time in relation to a particular phenomenon. Potential applications for research findings to inform the development of more informative gratitude measures and targeted gratitude interventions are discussed.

Insights into gratitude from open-ended qualitative interviews

Gratitude has long been a topic of interest within philosophy and theology (Harpham, 2004), and also within popular culture. Up until 2000 however the topic had received little interest from the scientific community, emotion researchers included (Emmons & McCullough, 2004). The last decade has seen a significant shift, with gratitude research increasing markedly, establishing a niche for itself within the Positive Psychology movement (Lambert, Graham, & Fincham, 2009). The majority of this research has focused on promising links between gratitude and well-being. This has led to the development of widely publicised interventions targeted at increasing individual levels of gratitude. While research findings are encouraging, they are somewhat compromised by inconsistencies in how gratitude is defined, including the often interchangeable use of the term "appreciation". In addition, the majority of researchers have quantified gratitude using self-report measures which lack a solid theoretical basis.

The first part of this paper will focus on the issues mentioned above, as well as discussing purported cognitive processes which underpin the experience of gratitude, links with personality factors and well-being, preliminary research investigating the inverse relationship with psychopathology, and also gratitude interventions. The second part of the paper outlines a study which seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the individual experience of gratitude, focussing on the types of experiences which elicit this state, and the underlying cognitive processes.

Defining gratitude and appreciation

Defining gratitude and appreciation in a scientific sense is complicated by the fact that both terms are commonly used within western culture. While a number of definitions have been proposed by the scientific community, a consensus has not yet

been reached. Published definitions seem to fit within three categories: basic, interpersonal, and broad. A basic definition proposed by Weiner (1985) states that gratitude is a positive affective state that results from a recognition that one has obtained a positive outcome and that an external source is responsible. Emmons and Shelton (2002) extend on this definition, adding that the external source may be a human benefactor, but also a non-human source, such as nature, an animal, God, or the cosmos. As such, a person may feel grateful to God after recovering from an illness, or to nature for a picturesque sunrise.

More restrictive interpersonal definitions of gratitude specify that the benefactor must be a person. McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, and Larson (2001) define gratitude as the positive emotion experienced when another person has intentionally given, or attempted to give, something of value. Gratitude can thus be experienced in response to a favour from a friend. As such, gratitude is a fundamentally interpersonal construct, and has been referred to as *interpersonal* or *prototypical* gratitude (Emmons & Shelton, 2002), as well as *benefit triggered* gratitude (Lambert et al., 2009). Experiencing prototypical gratitude can promote feelings of goodwill towards others, which may encourage reciprocal altruism, and help establish and develop social bonds (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). The potential for gratitude to engender reciprocal pro-social behaviour has led evolutionary theorists to propose that gratitude has evolved due to its capacity to confer a survival advantage (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Nowak & Roch, 2007; Trivers, 1971).

The third and more broad interpretation of gratitude does not require an external source or benefactor. Although there is still a cognitive valuing and positive affective response for what one has, the cause need not be attributed to a third party.

An example would be feeling grateful for experiencing good health. Although gratitude researchers do not explicitly define the term in this manner, this meaning is often reflected in the content of published research and measures based explicitly on a more limited interpersonal definition of gratitude (discussed further below). Adler and Fagley (2005) refer to their research as *appreciation*, however their definition of the construct is consistent with this broad definition of gratitude. They define appreciation as "acknowledging the value and meaning of something – an event, a person, a behaviour, an object – and feeling a positive emotional connection to it" (2005, p. 81). Appreciation can still involve an external source or benefactor, however in this case it is referred to as *gratitude*, and considered a sub-type of appreciation. Lambert et al. (2009) referred to this experience as *generalised gratitude*. Research which investigated lay understanding of the term gratitude found that college students' conceptualisations of gratitude were broader than just prototypical gratitude, and were actually more akin to generalised gratitude or appreciation (Lambert et al., 2009).

Effective research needs be based on clear definitions of the constructs being investigated – in order for research on gratitude and appreciation to progress in an effective and meaningful way, a consensus needs to be reached regarding how the terms are defined. While adopting appreciation as the more general term, with prototypical gratitude as a subtype seems a sensible and logical solution, this is unlikely to occur, as the majority of the foundation literature has been published under the heading of gratitude.

Events or experiences leading to the experience of gratitude and appreciation

Little has been published regarding the range of phenomena which elicit gratitude in people. As part of a pilot study, Adler and Fagley (2005) found that

undergraduate students reported being appreciative of friends and family, favours and help given by others, health, financial security, and opportunities. Published measures of gratitude and appreciation (discussed below) include items pertaining to health, basic needs, people, nature, food, education and music, suggesting these are common gratitude sources. It is possible that gratitude domains vary depending on factors such as age, cultural background and socioeconomic status, however this has not been reported in the research literature to date.

Similarly little has been published regarding the specific cognitive processes which underpin the experience of gratitude. A number of cognitive attributions have been suggested in relation to prototypical gratitude, with the most common being the appraised value of the help received, the cost of the help to the benefactor, and the extent to which the benefactor genuinely intended to help (see McCullough et al., 2001). Through the use of vignettes, research by Wood, Maltby, Stewart, Linley, and Joseph (2008) showed that the value of the help is evaluated in relative terms, by comparing it to other help received. To date, a model has not been published which explains the experience of general gratitude which does not require a personal benefactor.

Quantifying trait gratitude and appreciation

Gratitude can exist both as a state and a trait. McCullough et al. (2002) describe the "grateful disposition" as feeling gratitude more intensely (*intensity*), experiencing it more often (*frequency*), in response to more events (*span*), and towards a greater number of people for a single positive outcome (*density*). Wood, Froh, and Geraghty (2010) consider trait gratitude as "part of a wider life orientation towards noticing and appreciating the positive in the world … distinct from other emotions such as optimism, hope and trust" (2010, p. 891).

Several measures have been developed to quantify trait gratitude and appreciation: the six item Gratitude Questionnaire–6 (GQ-6; McCullough et al., 2002; Appendix A); the 81 item Appreciation Scale (AS; Adler & Fagley, 2005; Appendix B); and the 44 item Gratitude, Resentment and Appreciation Test (GRAT; Watkins, Woodward, Stone, & Kolts, 2003; Appendix C). The GQ-6 is a unifactorial measure, while the AS and the GRAT are both multifactorial.

The inconsistent way in which gratitude is defined has significant implications for the above measures. The GQ-6 and the GRAT both claim to be based on narrow interpersonal definitions of gratitude, however much of the content of the measures reflects a broad, non-interpersonal type of gratitude, aligned with Adler and Fagley's concept of appreciation (Lambert et al., 2009). For example, more than half of the GQ-6 items do not assume an interpersonal element (e.g., "I have so much in life to be thankful for"). For the GRAT, although the total item score is taken as a measure of dispositional gratitude, two of the three subscales – *sense of abundance*, and *simple appreciation* – are not characterised by interpersonal type gratitude.

Also problematic is the fact that the terms gratitude and appreciation are not explicitly defined nor explained in the questionnaire measures, and individual items are often framed in the format of "how grateful are you for x", or "how often do you feel appreciative of y". Given the Lambert et al. (2009) findings that the lay public tends to conceptualise gratitude more broadly than do most researchers, the construct being investigated needs to be clarified and clearly defined for research participants.

Based on exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses of the twelve different scales contained in the GQ-6, the AS and the GRAT, Wood, Maltby, Stewart, and Joseph (2008) concluded that that gratitude and appreciation represent a single-factor

personality trait, and proposed that the gratitude and appreciation literature be integrated. Although this may suggest that the lack of precision in defining and quantifying gratitude and appreciation is not a significant issue, fundamental to any field of research is establishing clear definitions of constructs, and use of sound and informative assessment tools.

There are two further assessment issues worth noting. The first relates to the nature of the assessment tools: all three measures are self-report format, and explicitly ask the extent to which people feel grateful or appreciative or thankful for various things[1] in their lives. The measures are quite transparent in this respect. Items for the resentment sub-scale of the GRAT use openly negative wording, for example, "I basically feel like life has ripped me off", and "There never seems to be enough to go around and I'm always coming up short." These issues are potentially problematic, given gratitude is a socially valued trait – it was rated amongst the most desirable character traits in Peterson and Seligman's character strengths and virtues (2004) and also rated in the highest 4% in terms of "likeableness" from a list of 844 person-descriptive words (Dumas, Johnson, & Lynch, 2002). Given these findings, gratitude questionnaire measures with strong face validity leave themselves vulnerable to biased responding, including socially desirable responding.

The second issue relates to the specific aspects of trait gratitude and appreciation which are being assessed. While the six items in the GQ-6 reflect the four components of the authors' definition of trait gratitude – intensity, frequency, span and density – the measure is unifactorial, providing only a single outcome score. It provides only a very general measure of trait gratitude through essentially

[1] Although rather imprecise sounding, the term "things" is often used by researchers in this area (e.g., Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005), as it is an unrestrictive all-encompassing term, as opposed to terms such as "experiences" or "phenomena", which although still broad, are more limited in scope.

asking people how grateful they are in six different ways, e.g. "If I had to list everything that I felt grateful for, it would be a very long list", and "When I look at the world, I don't see much to be grateful for". In comparison, the AS is much more comprehensive, and includes a number of items which pertain to domains of appreciation, how people express their appreciation, and strategies they use to feel more appreciative. The eight AS sub-scales however do not reflect this conceptual structure, rather reflecting various aspects of appreciation, without a strong theoretical base.

Relying on the above self report measures for quantifying trait gratitude is somewhat problematic. While they provide an estimate of trait gratitude, they are based on unclear or varied definitions of gratitude and appreciation. In addition, they offer little or no information about different situations or experiences which trigger gratitude, nor do they differentiate between different aspects of gratitude, such as intensity, frequency, and duration. New measures which effectively address these issues would be a welcome addition, and would allow a deeper understanding of the nature of gratitude and appreciation.

Trait gratitude, well-being and adaptive personality factors

Promising links between gratitude & well-being have no doubt inspired much of the recent interest in gratitude research. Most research in this area has relied exclusively on the GQ-6 or the GRAT for providing a measure of trait gratitude (issues with these measures have been outlined above). Broadly speaking, well-being relates to optimal psychological experience and functioning. While the term is often used in a general sense, the more specific conceptualisations of subjective well-being and psychological well-being are commonly used within well-being research.

Subjective well-being is often referred to as "happiness". It is associated with Aristotle's notion of hedonia, characterised by pleasure attainment and pain avoidance (Ryan & Deci, 2001). The three components of subjective well-being are positive affect, negative affect, and satisfaction with life (Diener, 1984; Ryan & Deci, 2001). In a review article, Wood et al. (2010) cited 12 studies which showed a positive relationship between gratitude and subjective well-being. A study by the same authors showed that gratitude predicted 8% of individual differences in subjective well-being after controlling for the 20 primary level factors underlying the Big Five personality traits (Wood, Joseph, & Maltby, 2009).

Psychological well-being, a related but distinct construct (Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002), represents a broader conceptualisation of well-being. It is associated with Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia (Ryan & Deci, 2001), which focuses on self-development, purposeful engagement with life, and meaning. Happiness according to psychological well-being is the by-product of a life well-lived (Keyes et al., 2002). Research by Wood, Joseph, and Maltby (2009) indicates a positive relationship between gratitude and all six dimensions of Ryff and Keyes' (1995) influential model of psychological well-being. The three dimensions most strongly correlated with gratitude are *personal growth, positive relationships with others* and *self-acceptance*, however gratitude was also shown to predict between 2% and 6% of individual variance in the remaining three dimensions of *personal growth, positive relationships with others, purpose in life,* and *self-acceptance.*

Adaptive personality traits associated with well-being also share a strong positive relationship with gratitude. As with well-being research, this research is also based on the self report GQ-6 or GRAT to quantify trait gratitude. A positive relationship has been shown to exist between gratitude and the Big Five personality

factors of *extraversion*, *agreeableness*, *openness to experience* and *conscientiousness*, and an inverse relationship shown with *neuroticism* (McCullough et al., 2002; McCullough, Tsang, & Emmons, 2004; Wood, Maltby, Gillett, Linley, & Joseph, 2008; Wood, Maltby, Stewart, Linley, et al., 2008). In summarising findings from a number of studies, Wood et al. (2010) concluded that gratitude was "correlated with traits associated with positive emotional functioning, lower dysfunction, and positive social relationships" (p. 893) – all of which are associated with positive well-being.

Gratitude's inverse relationship with psychopathology

Emerging evidence showing a negative relationship between gratitude and mental health disorders also points to a positive relationship between gratitude and well-being. Most of the research to date has focussed on the relationship between gratitude and depressive symptoms, however preliminary studies have commenced on gratitude and post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Depression is in part characterised by the absence of positive affect. The process of becoming depressed has been described as a downward negative spiral, whereby depressed mood and the resulting narrowed pessimistic thinking influence one another reciprocally (Peterson & Seligman, 1984). Conversely, according to Fredrickson's Broaden-and-Build theory, experiencing positive emotions such as gratitude, and the associated broadened thinking result in an upward spiral, and increased emotional well-being (Fredrickson, 2001). Studies involving the development of the GQ-6 show that gratitude is correlated with lower levels of both depression and stress (McCullough et al., 2002). In addition, a longitudinal gratitude study revealed that gratitude was able to predict lower levels of depression and also stress (Wood, Maltby, Gillett, et al., 2008). Findings from a recent series of studies

by Lambert, Fincham, and Stillman (2012) revealed that gratitude was related to fewer depressive symptoms, and that the relationship was in part mediated by positive emotion.

Compared with depression, relatively little research has focussed on the relationship between PTSD and gratitude (research on the related construct of post-traumatic growth is mentioned below in the context of gratitude related cognitions). Results from the one published study on PTSD showed that Vietnam war veterans diagnosed with PTSD had significantly lower levels of gratitude compared with those who did not have this diagnosis (Kashdan, Uswatte, & Julian, 2006). It is likely that research into gratitude and PTSD will become more of a focus in the future.

Explaining the relationship between gratitude and well-being

Determining the exact nature of the relationship between gratitude and well-being is something of a challenge – well-being is a complex construct, and gratitude a variously defined one. Never the less, a number of factors appear to at least partly explain how the constructs are related. While adaptive personality traits discussed above seem to play an important role, additional affective, interpersonal, and cognitive factors may also be implicated.

Positive affect. The most obvious link between gratitude and well-being is the positive affect which is common to both. People with higher levels of trait gratitude are likely to experience gratitude – and its concomitant positive affect – more frequently, more intensely and in response to more events. In addition, positive affect is associated with broader, more creative cognitive functioning (Isen, 1990). According to Fredrickson's (2001) Broaden-and-Build theory of positive emotions, in situations which are free from threat, such thinking tends to be adaptive. For

example, experiencing joy, an emotion associated with gratitude, can result in a desire to play, be creative, and interact with others. Such behaviours may assist in building enduring skills and resources which contribute to well-being and survival (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2007).

Interpersonal factors. Positive interactions between people may also partly explain the relationship between gratitude and well-being. People who experience prototypical gratitude often engage in reciprocal pro-social behaviour, "repaying" their benefactor (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; Tsang, 2006). Repayment may be tangible, such as a gift or service, or intangible, such as emotional support during a difficult time. This direct reciprocity can assist in establishing and strengthening social bonds (Simmel, 1950, as cited in Emmons & Shelton, 2002). In a longitudinal study, gratitude was shown to predict higher levels of perceived social support (Wood, Maltby, Gillett, et al., 2008) – a significant predictor of well-being (Cohen & Wills, 1985).

Gratitude can also lead to "upstream reciprocity", or indirect repayment (Nowak & Roch, 2007), whereby prosocial behaviour is directed towards a person (or persons) other than the benefactor. Prosocial behaviour associated with both direct and indirect forms of reciprocity has been shown to be distinct from that which arises in response to experiencing general positive affect (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006).

As mentioned previously, gratitude is a highly regarded personal trait (Peterson & Seligman, 2004); as such, people who are perceived to be more grateful may be regarded as more likeable, and therefore more likely to experience positive interactions with others.

Cognitive processes. Links can also be drawn between well-being and the cognitive processes associated with gratitude, such as being consciously aware of

positive aspects of everyday experiences, or finding positives in difficult or challenging situations. If common experiences such as eating a meal or walking through a park are fully attended to and infused with positive meaning, an obvious consequence is more potential experiences to enjoy, and feel grateful for. "Savouring" interventions, in which participants are encouraged to pay full attention to everyday experiences, have resulted in increased levels of well-being (Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006). Related research on coping also indicates that focusing on and valuing everyday experiences is associated with an improved ability to deal with difficult circumstances (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000). Furthermore, savouring past experiences through reflection and reminiscing will potentially result in the perception of a life filled with positive experiences.

Being willing and able to see positives in challenging or negative situations also has implications for well-being. It has been suggested that the positive appraisals associated with gratitude may be integral to the posttraumatic growth process (Wood et al., 2010). Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) describe post-traumatic growth as "the experience of positive change that occurs as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life crises" (p. 1). Research on coping indicates that seeing value or meaning in adverse circumstances is associated with an improved ability to deal with difficult circumstances (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000). Similarly, recovery from an traumatic experience is influenced by the extent to which people can find some benefit in their experience (Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998). Positive reappraisal or positive reframing which can occur as part of the post-traumatic growth experience has shown to be positively correlated with gratitude (Wood, Joseph, & Linley, 2007).

Gratitude related cognitions may have a secondary impact well-being through reducing the effect of "hedonic adaptation", and also by improving the quality of sleep. Hedonic adaptation (Brickman & Campbell, 1971) is the process by which people tend to revert to baseline levels of happiness following a temporary increase in response to a positive event, such as a lottery win (Brickman & Campbell, 1971; Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman, 1978). Having a grateful outlook and consciously focussing on and savouring the positive things in one's life may help mitigate this effect, potentially resulting in more enduring positive affect and well-being.

In regard to sleep, a study by Wood, Joseph, Lloyd, and Atkins (2009) found that grateful people experienced more restful sleep. This was found to be related to their positive pre-sleep cognitions, as opposed to negative and worried thoughts which can impair sleep, and have flow on effects on well-being.

Gratitude interventions targeted at increasing individual well-being

Evidence of the strong relationship between gratitude and well-being has led to applied research which aims to improve individual well-being by increasing trait gratitude. In the last decade, more than a dozen studies have been published on gratitude interventions, with most common format adopted being the gratitude list or diary (e.g., Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). These studies require participants to keep a regular record of things in their life for which they feel grateful. In Emmons and McCullogh's (2003) much cited "Counting Blessings" study, participants were asked to keep either daily or weekly lists of "up to five things in your life that you are grateful or thankful for" (p. 379) . Improvements were observed for a number of aspects of well-being, including increased positive affect and optimism, as well as

increased pro-social behaviour and improved physical health symptoms. A number of subsequent studies have adopted a similar approach, notably Seligman's well know "Three Good Things" study (Seligman et al., 2005).

Adopting a slightly different approach, Watkins, Woodward, Stone, & Kolts (2003) asked participants to complete a one-off writing exercise. Participants who wrote about the summer activities in which they had participated were found to have less subsequent negative affect compared with those in the control condition, who wrote about things they had not been able to do during the summer. Another study reported increased positive affect for participants who were required to either think about, write about, or write to a person to whom they felt grateful, compared with participants who wrote about the layout of their living room (Watkins et al., 2003). Seligman et al (2005) observed significant increases in happiness and decreases in depression for participants who wrote a gratitude letter to a benefactor, and then visited the person to read the letter aloud.

While the above interventions suggest that the experience of gratitude can be increased, with associated increases in well-being, Wood et al. (2010) note that most of these studies lack an appropriate control condition, and are not being compared with gold standard therapies. So while the findings have been positive, the outcomes need to be interpreted somewhat cautiously at this point.

Summary

Gratitude is a relatively new field of research, which has expanded significantly over the last decade. The term gratitude has been defined in different ways by gratitude researchers, with some focussing on "prototypical gratitude", which involves benefiting from the act of another person, whereas others focus on gratitude in a broader sense, whereby a person may be grateful for good health. The

latter more general form of gratitude is referred to by some researchers as "appreciation", further complicating the problems with defining the field.

Several self report measures of trait gratitude have been published recently, and while they provide some estimate of trait gratitude, they are based on differing and unclear definitions of gratitude, and not based on an underlying theory of gratitude. In addition, they tend to have high face validity; this is problematic when people are asked to rate their own levels of gratitude (in one measure, as explicitly as "how grateful are you for ..."), as gratitude is a highly valued personal trait. As such, the measures are vulnerable to socially desirable responding, and respondents adopting a particular response set.

To date, little research has focused on the different sources of gratitude – the things or experiences which elicit gratitude in people. Additionally, little has been published regarding how people actually evaluate their gratitude experiences – the cognitive evaluations which underpin the gratitude experience. Existing measures of trait gratitude which simply require people to rate their own levels of gratitude are not suitable for exploring these issues.

Research has shown a strong positive relationship between gratitude and well-being, and an inverse relationship with mental health disorders such as depression and PTSD. A number of interventions have been reported which aim to increase well-being and mental health by increasing individual levels of gratitude. Given gratitude's potential benefits in this area, it is important at this point to gain a clearer and deeper understanding of the constructs, in order to form a strong theoretical basis for future research and interventions. This was the overarching aim of the current study. More specifically, it sought to investigate phenomena for which people report feeling grateful, the reasons they considered these thing or experiences

beneficial, and the underlying cognitive appraisals involved. Adopting a qualitative approach has the potential to gain a deep, rich phenomenological understanding of what people are grateful for, and their specific reasons why. The potential for issue of socially desirable responding also needs to be considered.

Method

Approach

The study utilised a qualitative approach, with data obtained through in-depth individual interviews with participants. Interviews were open ended and phenomenological in nature, focussing on participants' own experiences and views. There were no set interview questions.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. This method was selected as the most appropriate approach, as it allows discrete themes to be identified within the data, and can be used without a pre-existing theoretical base (Boyatzis, 1998). It is well suited to a topic such as gratitude, which has not been extensively researched, and currently lacks a strong theoretical base (Braun & Clarke, 2006).Thematic analysis is especially suited to analysing open ended, unstructured interview data, which is not amenable to a quantitative style analysis. While a Grounded Theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) is often used to analyse similar data, its principal aim is to generate a specific theory, which is not the aim of the current project. In addition, Grounded Theory requires a saturation sampling procedure, whereby participants continue to be recruited in an ongoing manner while data analysis proceeds, until "saturation" of the theory is achieved – that is, until the theory can explain all the gathered data. Such an approach potentially requires a large number of participants, which would be beyond the scope of the current project.

For the purposes of this study, gratitude is defined as noticing and ascribing a positive value to an event, an experience, a person, a behaviour or an object, deriving a benefit, and experiencing a positive emotional response. Participants were not informed that the research was about gratitude and appreciation, and neither term

was used in the recruitment process, and only used by the researcher during individual interviews if first used by the participant, and then only sparingly. This approach was adopted to avoid the issue of differing definitions and lay understandings of the two terms, and to reduce the likelihood of socially desirable responding. Also, by avoiding the explicit use of the terms gratitude and appreciation, it was hoped that participants would be more likely to consider gratitude experiences beyond those commonly reported, such as those cited in the Adler and Fagley (2005) pilot study (e.g., health, financial security, family and friends).

Participants

Participants were 12 University of Tasmania first year undergraduate psychology students (10 female, 2 male).[2] Participation in the study was voluntary. In exchange for their participation, participants received partial course credit for an introductory psychology course. Recruitment for the project was conducted across all three UTAS campuses via poster advertisements, and advertised on the School of Psychology website. The title used to advertise the study was "Beneficial Experiences".

Procedure

Prior to recruitment, ethics approval for the study was granted by the University of Tasmania Social Sciences Human Ethics Committee, approved under

[2] Interviews were conducted as part of the initial phase of a larger and conceptually different project, the aim of which was to develop a theoretical model of gratitude, and then design and test a new measure of gratitude, based on the theory. The project was abandoned part way through after academic support was withdrawn. Interviews with undergraduate students were to be used to generate a preliminary model of gratitude, with the model then tested and refined using a broader community sample. For the initial round of undergraduate interviews, it was decided to limit the collection of personal data, to encourage students to feel comfortable revealing potentially very personal information, and to decrease the likelihood of being identified in the written report findings, based on the specific personal experiences described in the research findings. Additional demographic data for these participants – including age – would have been sought had the intention not been to conduct further interviews.

minimal ethics reference number H0010142. The research followed the ethical guidelines of the Australian Psychological Society.

Individual interviews were conducted by the researcher during September and October 2008, either face to face in a small quiet office, or by telephone. Prior to interviews commencing, participants read an Information Sheet (Appendix D) which contained details of the study, ethical information, and contact details for the researcher, in the event that participants wished to raise concerns or seek further information about the study. Participants then read and signed a Consent Form (Appendix E), indicating their informed consent to participate in the study. For interviews conducted via telephone, participants were emailed the Information Sheet and Consent Form prior to the day of the interview. Verbal consent was given by these participants over the telephone, with the researcher signing the consent form on their behalf. The title of the study listed on participant documents was "Factors which Influence Positive Life Experiences".

Immediately prior to the interview commencing, participants were reminded that participation was completely voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without prejudice. They were also asked to indicate if at any time they felt uncomfortable with any aspect of the interview.

Interviews were open ended and unstructured, commencing with participants simply being asked to talk about "experiences or things in their life which they considered beneficial". Focussing on beneficial experiences provided an opportunity for participants to cite and discuss experiences for which they were grateful, without the interview having an overt gratitude focus.

There were no directions to participants to talk about just one particular thing or experience, or many, either past or present. Examples of advice given to

participants who sought clarification about what to talk about include "It's completely open"; "It's up to you to interpret it however you want"; and "There might be a whole bunch of things that you feel are beneficial, there might just be one." Participants who listed a number of beneficial topics were offered the choice to focus on one or more of these in depth.

The interview format was flexible, with interviews often wide ranging in their content. To gain a deep understanding of participants own subjective experiences, clarification and follow up questions were frequently used. Closed or leading style questions were avoided as much as possible. The following are examples of questions and prompts used: "When you say… what do you mean exactly?"; "Can you tell me a little bit more about that?"; "What kind of things?"; "In what way?"; "Can you give me an example?"; "*How* did it affect…?"; "Is there anything else you wanted to add regarding …".

The average duration of the interviews was 32 minutes. Interviews were concluded when it was considered the subject matter had been sufficiently explored in terms of its research utility. All interviews were recorded for subsequent transcription and data analysis with the prior permission of the participants. An Olympus Digital Voice Recorder VN-480PC was used, with the addition of a JNC Digital telephone adapter for telephone interviews, to allow direct line recording.

Interview recordings were downloaded onto a personal computer using Olympus Digital Wave Player software. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and in full by the researcher, with the data entered directly into the qualitative software package NVivo version 7.0 (QSR International) for analysis. To protect individual privacy, people's names were changed in the transcripts (both for participants, and also the people about whom they spoke).

Data analysis approach

Thematic analysis of the interview data followed the rigorous multi-step approach recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006), and is outlined in Table 1 below. *Codes* refers to significant and elemental features of the data, whereas *themes* represents noteworthy patterns of responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The subsequent process of writing up and interpreting the results involved an intensive iterative process of revisiting steps 4 and 5 numerous times, until the three major themes and component sub-themes were finalised. While it may have been beneficial to have multiple raters involved for at least part of the data analysis process, this was not feasible, due to high expense involved.

Table 1

Thematic Analysis Procedure

	Phase	Steps involved
1	Familiarisation with the data	Ideas were noted down during the interview process, and also following reflection immediately after the interview. Ideas were further identified and explored during the lengthy data transcription process.
2	Systematic generation of initial codes	Transcript data were extensively coded using NVivo 10.0 software. An inductive or "bottom up" approach was used, whereby coding was not based on researcher preconceptions or theories. Over 60 initial codes were generated during this phase.
3	Collating codes into potential themes	Based on the numerous codes generated in the previous step, a list of initial themes was generated, again using NVivo software.
4	Reviewing themes against the data	The value and validity of each theme was then considered by reviewing the data. Themes that did not represent a coherent pattern were either modified, merged, split or discarded. Much of the data were recoded. Hand coding using software printouts was used from this point on.
5	Defining and naming specific themes	Themes were further refined, and then clearly defined and given meaningful and descriptive titles.

Results and Discussion

Thematic analysis of the wide ranging interview data revealed three major themes representing domains or sources of participant gratitude. The themes identified, listed in Figure 1 below, were *Close Personal Relationships*, which had two sub-themes, *Family* and *Self*; *Adversity and Personal Change*, with the sub-themes of *Self* and *Others*, and *Self Development Pursuits*, a unitary theme. Only interview material which met the definition for gratitude outlined above was considered. In addition, each theme was widely represented by the data, and did not just reflect prominent or salient interview information provided by only one or two participants. The actual number of participants who spoke either directly or indirectly about a particular theme is not stated in the results, due to the potential to misrepresent the theme's significance (four participants mentioning a theme briefly in passing is quite different to four for whom the theme was the main focus of the interview). For the purposes of anonymity, the 12 individual participants are referred to as P1, P2, P3 and so forth.

The three themes are each outlined in turn, along with reasons given by participants as to why they considered their experience beneficial. Underlying cognitive evaluation processes which may contribute to the experience of gratitude are discussed, in addition to other noteworthy aspects of the theme. This is followed by an integrative discussion section.

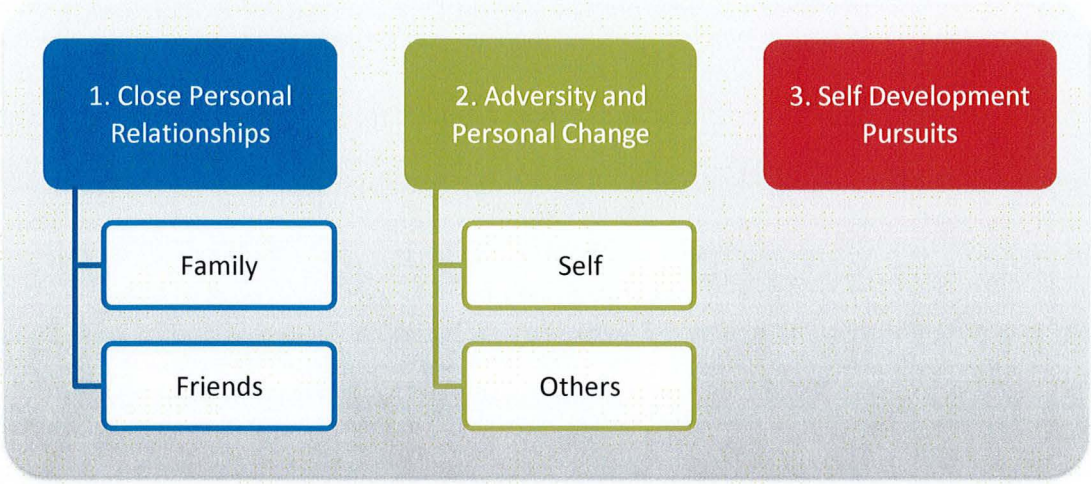

Figure 1. Interview themes representing sources of gratitude.

Theme 1: Close Personal Relationships

Being appreciative of close personal relationships with others was a common theme and major focus within the interview for over half the participants. These relationships were valued for a variety of reasons, such as feeling understood, feeling accepted, and consistency of support. Two distinct subthemes emerged: *Family* and *Friends*.

Family. Within this first sub-theme of Close Personal Relationships, participants clearly considered family relationships to be very important, within both the nuclear and extended family. The following quotes convey the significance of particular close relationships in their lives: "I wouldn't know what I'd do without [my mother]" (P8); "I think that that bond with my grandmother is one of the most important things in my life" (P3); and "I don't know where I'd be without my grandmother, seriously" (P1).

Participants outlined a range of needs which they considered these relationships met for them, including emotional, practical, and material. One participant was appreciative of the financial support, living accommodation, and the

companionship his nuclear family provided (P9), whereas another was appreciative of the emotional support and vocational support provided by her mother and father respectively (P2).

Family relationships were also appreciated for the consistent and enduring nature of both the relationship, and the associated support, illustrated as follows: "[My parents have] always been so supportive of me and it doesn't matter what I do, they're always there to back me up and to give me support" (P2); "My parents were always there for me, you know, if ever I needed anything, you know, they would've gone out of their way to do it for me" (P7); and "Friends come and go, but family stays on" (P8). There was also a sense of participants feeling genuinely cared for, and that this emotional support was unconditional.

Two participants spoke warmly about shared traits with particular family members with whom they felt especially close. One enthusiastically described a number of her own behaviours and mannerisms which were similar to those of her grandmother, adding "it's just her, to a tee!" (P3). Another spoke of an especially close bond she shared with her much younger second cousins, proudly commenting "a lot of them look a lot like me… I see a little bit of myself in them, and their parents have noticed it" (P5). There was a sense of closely identifying with and feeling connected to someone they admired within their family, and enjoying other people noticing their similarities.

Several participants considered that they had become more appreciative of particular relationships over time, which generally occurred in response to a change in circumstances. For example, one participant said she appreciated her parents after moving out of the family home, considering she had taken their support for granted prior to this (P2). When her father was later faced with two potentially life

threatening illnesses, she added "having just that scare of having Dad in hospital quite recently… I guess it has changed my thinking a little bit and sort of made me appreciate you know the fact that Mum and Dad are still *there*." A similar sentiment was expressed by another participant whose mother was critically ill for a period of time, explaining "It made me want to … cherish every moment that I have with her" (P8).

Support provided during difficult experiences had resulted in a greater appreciation of family relationships for two participants. A participant who was subjected to school bullying instigated by former friends stated that "The whole experience made me cherish my family even more" (P8). She said she became much closer to her mother, confided in her completely, and described her as "a diary you don't have to write in." In a similar vein, another participant indicated that although she'd always been close to her grandmother, she appreciated the relationship even more when experiencing a particularly difficult time (P3). For both participants, these close supportive relationships appeared to be in sharp contrast with other significant relationships in their lives – the bullying peer group for the first, and what was perceived as a largely unsupportive relationship with her parents for the second. (The notion of becoming more appreciative associated with experiencing difficult situations was quite prevalent, and will be discussed further in the context of the Adversity and Personal Change theme.)

Friends. This is the second of the Close Personal Relationships sub-themes. Reasons given as to why participants appreciated friendship relationships were somewhat different compared with family relationships. Sharing common interests, shared activities, spending time together, and having fun were seen as important. Other notable features were feeling relaxed, comfortable and at ease around their

friends, with participants commenting "It's carefree. You don't have to worry – about anything" (P9); and "I just feel myself around [them]…I just always feel really really normal around those guys" (P5). Participants also indicated that they felt accepted within these relationships, experiencing a sense of connectedness and belonging, apparent in the following quote: "When I met them I had never met anyone probably in my life that I felt such a connection with and I could just be myself around… I think that's why those mates were so beneficial for me because they're so similar. I didn't feel like I didn't belong – at all. I instantly felt welcome…" (P3).

Feeling understood was also valued by participants, as well as being able to trust and confide in friends, and not feel judged. As one participant explained, "You can just let your guard down with them, …Yeah, it's a *big* thing. Like there's not many people you can just say anything to, without worrying what they'll think and stuff. Like, those girls, you could just say anything and you know they won't be judging you or anything" (P5).

A final significant feature of friendship relationships mentioned by participants was their enduring nature. Although this aspect was more prevalent in the context of family relationships, participants appreciated that in spite of having disagreements and arguments, or periods of non-contact, their close friendships would endure, and remain strong. One participant considered that a point of difference between his close friends and other friends was that after a disagreement "… we can come back together and say 'well, we're over that... move on.' And we're back up to a good healthy friendship" (P9).

Discussion. It was evident across both of the Close Personal Relationships subthemes (Family; Friends) that participants were appreciative of particular close

personal relationships in their lives, with the terms such as "appreciate" and "cherish" used. Participants talked about the value of particular relationships, and the ways in which they personally benefited from them. Their language and expression conveyed a strong sense of positive emotional connection.

Of the three major themes, subject matter from Close Personal Relationships comes closest to characterising interpersonal or prototypical gratitude, which results from the intentional act of a personal benefactor. Participants did not however focus on specific favours received – rather, the relationships themselves seemed to be the target of the gratitude. They appreciated the ongoing nature of the relationship, and aspects such as understanding, emotional connectedness and unconditional support. Family more than friends seemed to be associated with prototypical gratitude, especially in relation to support participants received. For friendships, there was more of sense of an equal, reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationship.

Given the sample was comprised of undergraduate students it's not surprising that relationships with friends were highly valued. In regard to family relationships, many of the participants may have still been living with their parents, or receiving ongoing support from them while studying, which may have contributed to the strong sense of gratitude participants expressed regarding these relationships.

Somewhat surprisingly, only one participant indicated being appreciative of a romantic relationship, and this formed only a very small part of the interview. It is possible that some or many of the participants were not in a relationship at the time, or had not yet been involved in a significant romantic relationship (during the interviews, three participants indicated they were currently in either a married or defacto relationship, however detailed demographic data were not collected in regard to living situation or relationship status, so it is not possible to comment further).

Another possibility is that participants did not feel comfortable discussing aspects of their intimate relationships in a research interview.

The degree to which these important relationships were appreciated seemed to be evaluated on the basis of the actual benefit(s) received, and how valuable the relationship was, compared with other relationships – cognitive appraisals purported to underlie the experience of prototypical gratitude. Interview data however suggest an additional factor affects participants' experience of gratitude – that is, the degree to which the relationship successfully meets a need or needs. For example, the participant who was bullied felt that her mother was the only person she could confide in at a time when she was in desperate need of emotional support. This was a time of particular need for her, and she indicated being extremely grateful for this relationship.

The data also suggest that the way in which these valued relationships are appraised can change over time, resulting in a change in gratitude or appreciation. Several participants indicated that they had become more appreciative of particular relationships, for example, a participant who moved out of home became more appreciative of her parents; for two others, the threat of losing a parent through illness resulted in an increased appreciation of the relationship. In all three examples, a change in circumstances occurred which seemed to lead to an increased awareness of the needs which these relationships filled; as a result, the relationships seemed to be valued more highly.

Theme 2: Adversity and Personal Change

The second major theme of Adversity and Personal Change is a rich and surprisingly prevalent theme. Participants indicated they were appreciative of a

variety of confronting experiences which would commonly be viewed as negative, for example, suffering from major depression, or being involved in a serious car accident. The main sub-theme of *Self* focusses on struggles faced directly by the participants themselves, whereas the second sub-theme of *Others* is related to witnessing personal or social disadvantage in others.

Self. For participants whose lives had been directly threatened through accident or physical illness, there was an increased appreciation for simply being alive, as well as a clear intention to live life to the full. A participant who had survived a brain tumour stated that "life is such a gift, really. It's just so black and white, really life. You're in it or you're out of it. That made me realise that – so enjoy every minute" (P11). Although not directly affected in a physical sense, threats to the health of significant others also affected the way participants viewed life – after one participant's father was hospitalised with serious health concerns she arrived at the following conclusion: "I guess just that you can be going along perfectly happy one day and something can happen the next that you're just not expecting and you know totally changing your life almost I guess. …things *can* go wrong, things can change in the blink of an eye" (P2).

A participant who had experienced significant mental health difficulties was clearly grateful for the positive mental health she now felt she experienced. For her, the two experiences were in stark contrast. Speaking about this, she explained "Oh it's been *shocking*! [laughs]. That's why I really appreciate feeling good and that's why I do so much to try to maintain that." She said she now thinks about "how lucky you are to be feeling good and just being grateful for that fact" (P6).

Several participants appreciated the improved coping skills they felt they had developed as a result of dealing with a difficult situation. The considered they had

become psychologically stronger. A participant who had been bullied at school remarked "it really got me up for the world – the vicious world! [laughs] ... I can take anything the world throws at me [now]" (P8). For another participant, difficult experiences during her teen years, including a family member's suicide attempt, led her to conclude: "I don't know why it has made me – or has made me think that I'm better at coping, but I do feel that it made me stronger …when different things pop up in my life, I feel like I can deal with them a lot better than I did" (P3). A participant who had experienced chronic pain appreciated being "more able to disengage when things are really bad" (P12).

Experiencing difficult situations led some participants to develop what they considered to be a "better perspective" on life, illustrated as follows: "I think [failing at something] puts a lot of things in perspective, and it makes you value what you actually have, and what you've achieved" (P9). In addition, small problems seemed to become less significant – regarding a family break up, one participant remarked "It's hard to think of small problems the way I used to back then, like after you've been through something big" (P5). Others indicated that when things were not going well for them, they deliberately reflected on the difficult situation(s) they've faced in order to provide a point of comparison, allowing them to view their current difficulties as relatively minor. For example, the participant whose family member had attempted suicide said that "To me at the time that was the worst of the worst thing that could ever happen … I definitely compare things to that stage and I think 'well, I got through that, and I can get through this'" (P3). Another who was bullied explained "now that I look back on it, it's like, things can't get as bad as that. It's like you've hit rock bottom, at one point of your life, and you think like 'oh, um, it can't get any worse than that'… I compare it all the time" (P8). Experiencing

difficult situations seemed to result in participants becoming either more appreciative of their current lives, either for what they actually have, or the realisation that things could be much worse!

Participants also considered they had benefited from adopting a generally more positive outlook on life as a response to the difficult situation they'd faced, illustrated in the following two quotes: "the chronic fatigue and depressions and stuff, they … kind of led to different ways or more adaptive ways of thinking to some extent" (P12), and regarding a car accident: "I almost felt like I started again.... Just a lot wiser from the whole experience. You just look at life differently" (P1).

There was also a strong sense of appreciation for the opportunity that difficult experiences provided for changing or defining the self. Comments included "it's made me sort of who I am and made me realise what I wanted to do with the rest of my life" (P3); and "I now feel like I know myself really well, and I'm aware of more things about myself" (P6). A participant who had to move away from her close family at 15 acknowledged "That wasn't great… I think that's kind of helped shape me too, and helped me grow up a bit" (P7). Similar sentiments were expressed by a number of other participants. Generally, participants felt they had gained significant self-knowledge, and had a clearer idea of the future goals.

A final aspect of difficult situations reported to be beneficial was the opportunity to develop or strengthen relationships, already discussed within the context of the Close Personal Relationships theme. Participants indicated they became closer to family or friends who had been supportive of them during a difficult time.

Others. This is the second of the two Adversity and Personal Change subthemes. For some participants, becoming aware – or more aware – of those less well-off was considered to be a beneficial experience. These experiences related either to travel, or to volunteer work with charity organisations. Although the experiences were confronting, there was an appreciation of the increased knowledge and awareness of the situation of others, as well as an increased sense of appreciation for their own lives.

One participant appreciated the increased awareness that travelling to South East Asia had given her about conditions in developing countries. Speaking about people living in poverty, or being homeless, she said: "it's just good for people to know what's going on … it's not like it is for us Australians everywhere else around the world, and seeing it on TV's a lot different to seeing it in real life" (P5). To her, the first hand nature of the experience was crucial: "I wouldn't *care* if I hadn't been there… [travel] would help a lot of people I think – put things into perspective at least."

A participant who worked with disadvantaged children valued the insight she'd gained into social issues such as unemployment, drug use, family breakdowns, and the impact of low socioeconomic status: "It's sort of taught me to appreciate what I have a lot more… I guess opportunities like education, schooling and everything, and to be able to actually get involved in out-of-school clubs and groups… a lot of people don't have that opportunity" (P10). The participant who had travelled overseas used her experiences to both remind herself how fortunate she was, and also to have empathy for others: "when you're doing luxurious things, like you know, driving your own car… you've always got to think about how other

people are at the same time as what you're doing" (P5). Following her travels, she considered Australians led very privileged lives.

Discussion. The theme of Adversity and Personal Change is a particularly complex one, in that the main focus of participants' appreciation seemed to be the opportunities which difficult or confronting experiences afforded for subsequent personal development or change. Dealing with or witnessing adversity was a major focus of interviews for over half the participants, and their sense of appreciation and gratitude is conveyed in the quoted material.

A major focus within the theme was an appreciation of perceived improvements in participant well-being following from their difficult experiences. Changes cited included a more positive outlook, better coping skills, more adaptive thought processes, a stronger sense of self, and improved relationships with others. Participants seemed to use a process of self comparison, whereby current higher levels of well-being were contrasted with lower levels from the past.

Participants may also have been evaluating their grateful experiences based on the personal cost involved in dealing with their difficult situations, for example, the mental and emotional effort required to recover from depression. In this instance, there may be an added appreciation for current positive mental health, due to the awareness of the difficulty involved in reaching that point. This is similar to one of the appraisals thought to underpin prototypical gratitude: the perceived cost of the assistance (or gift) to the benefactor. For gratitude that does not involve an interpersonal transaction, the personal cost to the self involved in obtaining the benefit may be a factor in determining the degree of gratitude or appreciation experienced.

As was indicated in the first theme of Close Personal Relationships, appreciation in relation to a particular thing or experience can change over time. The current theme included examples of participants' own situations remaining constant, but an increase in their appreciation for what they already had, or for simply being alive. This occurred as a result of participants re-evaluating their own situations after becoming aware of others less fortunate, or of people living in very difficult conditions. Through a process of downward social comparison, participants came to view themselves as comparatively well off. For those who were exposed to potential threat to life, there was an increased appreciation for being alive. Both cases involve a relative judgment – either a comparison with others, or a comparison with what might be.

It was interesting to note participants' use of deliberate strategies to elicit a more grateful state, for example, recalling difficult times as a way of putting current relatively minor difficulties into perspective. Participants also drew on past experiences where they had successfully navigated challenges in order to feel more confident in their current coping ability. Such strategies are likely to have positive implications in terms of well-being.

In addition to appreciating the positive personal outcomes associated with difficult situation, in some cases participants actually indicated they were grateful for the confronting experience itself. The appreciation seemed to result from processes of positive reinterpretation and benefit finding, which allowed participants to view the experience in a positive light. In some cases they indicated that they were grateful for the event in hindsight, again indicating how the experience of gratitude is not set in stone, but changes depending on the underlying cognitive attributions.

Theme 3: Self Development Pursuits

This third and final theme is quite broad, with no discrete sub-themes involved. It encompasses challenges or pursuits participants elected to engage in, based on perceived benefits in terms of self-development. Examples include challenging goals such as immigrating to Australia, enrolling at university, and the regular practice of well-being pursuits such as music performance and yoga.

When discussing challenges they had taken on in their life, participants tended to focus on the value of the challenge process itself, more so than the outcomes achieved. This was especially notable the for participants who had relocated, either moving overseas or interstate, taken on a challenging job, or had pursued advanced level music studies. Having a purpose and sense of direction was valued – as one participant said "If you're not going anywhere, well, what are you gonna do?" (P9).

Challenging situations were valued for the opportunities they provided to increase knowledge, develop skills, and explore personal limits. Two participants were appreciative of the opportunities afforded them by immigrating to Australia. One considered the extra study and work opportunities she felt existed in Australia had allowed her to try more things, and get to know what she really wanted – and did not want – to do with her life, adding "I think Australia has really kind of let me come out of my shell" (P3). The second expressed appreciation for access to tertiary education in Australia which wasn't available in his home country, and felt he had benefited from the different ideas and ways of thinking had had been exposed to in Australia.

Challenges and well-being pursuits which facilitated or contributed to a sense of independence and self-pride were also considered beneficial. Speaking about moving interstate by herself to take up a challenging job, one participant explained

"... it was almost as if I had to prove to myself that I could do it alone, without the support of my family perhaps and friends" (P3). In a similar vein, a participant who supported himself while studying during his early teens, and then independently relocated to Australia said "to me, those kind of experience, like struggling for yourself, I think it's a very positive move in the sense that every step you make you have to be proud of yourself" (P4).

Through successfully meeting challenges participants indicated that as well an increased self-efficacy, their confidence in their ability to meet future challenges was enhanced, for example: "I know now – and from even just getting in to uni – that I *can* do it – I can do something if I put my mind to it" (P3). Participants also identified benefits in actually failing to successfully meet a challenge. A participant who failed a pivotal music performance examination considered the experience to be beneficial, citing reasons such as developing a more balanced perspective, and becoming less concerned with external evaluations: "I don't want to be competing for marks, goals, whatever. I just want to do what's right by me. Or at least try..." (P9). Receiving a lower mark than expected for an assignment was used as motivation for another participant, describing the experience as "quite *good*, because it made me all the more determined to do better next time" (P3).

Participants considered pursuits such as yoga, martial arts and music contributed to their emotional well-being, in part due to the positive affect generated: "I love music... Music is a gift ... having something you love is really important" (P9). A participant who engaged in regular yoga practice felt that aside from the physical benefits, the underlying philosophy which included elements of mindfulness and gratitude allowed her to become "grateful for everything around you, without being religious... you get more things out of smaller things" (P6). She

was extremely appreciative of the impact of yoga practice on her sense of well-being, and described her newly developed positive attitude as "just *huge*. I mean, it's just the person I *am*" (P6). In effect, she was grateful to yoga for allowing her to become more grateful!

Discussion. Similar to the previous Adversity and Personal Change theme, this theme of Self Development Pursuits is characterised by a broad form of gratitude, rather than prototypical gratitude. Although both themes are associated with self-development, the experiences discussed in relation to Self Development Pursuits were by definition deliberately chosen by participants and considered to be positive in and of themselves.

Given the sample consisted of young undergraduate students, it was not surprising that there was a focus on challenges and activities which allowed participants to explore and develop their identity, and to develop a sense of independence, especially as some of these experiences had occurred in previous – and possibly more formative – years. The fact that participants were enrolled in a university level psychology course suggests a degree of willingness and a capacity to face and deal with challenges, which may in part account for the prevalence of this theme.

In a similar vein to coping with personal adversity in the second theme, two participants who failed to successfully achieve a particular goal (pass a music examination; receive a high mark for a psychology assignment) positively reframed their experiences. This enabled them to draw benefits from the experiences: either adopting what they considered a more balanced perspective on life, or motivating them to work harder in the future.

The way in which participants evaluated personal self challenge experiences in terms of gratitude is somewhat complicated, as benefits were seen in both the process and the outcome of the different pursuits. In general these were pursuits or goals which were valued and viewed as beneficial from the outset – and pursued specifically for these reasons. As mentioned above, the goals and pursuits generally facilitated self-development, and a process of retrospective self-comparison may have contributed to participants' sense of appreciation.

For this theme, attributions regarding the personal costs involved with these challenges and pursuits may also underpin the experience of gratitude. It is likely that an outcome will be more valued if a great deal of effort was expended. To some extent, these activities and pursuits may also be appreciated because they met particular needs for the participants, for example, the opportunity for emotional expression that playing music allows.

Changes in gratitude were not a feature of this theme, however were notable for one participant, who spoke of marked increases in her level of trait gratitude. This seemed to result from being exposed to ideas of mindfulness and gratitude through yoga classes, experiencing some degree of benefits within the class, and then integrating these practices in her daily life. An upward positive spiral seemed to ensue, whereby a more positive and grateful approach resulted in multiple ongoing well-being benefits.

General Discussion

The current project sought to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of gratitude by examining the phenomena which people report feeling grateful for, the reasons why they consider these things beneficial, and the underlying cognitive attributions involved. Open-ended individual interviews in which participants were asked to talk about "Beneficial Experiences" were conducted. The terms gratitude and appreciation were avoided in naming and describing the research, the intention being to encourage a broad range of responses from participants, rather than just things commonly associated with gratitude, such as family and friends. The other reason for adopting this approach was to minimise the impact of socially desirable responding.

Sources of gratitude. Interview data revealed a wide range of phenomena for which participants indicated feeling grateful, the three prominent themes being Close Personal Relationships; Adversity and Personal Change; and Self Development Pursuits. These themes were apparent across a wide range of experiences discussed by participants, including being bullied, experiencing physical illness, and important friendships. As themes have been discussed individually in the three separate discussion sections above, this general discussion section will focus on broader issues which emerged from the data.

Within the interviews, there was a strong tendency for participants to focus on a particular experience or thing which had had a significant impact on their life, often with implications for self-development or well-being. This included experiences which would generally be considered negative, such as mental health difficulties. Demand characteristics associated with voluntary participation in an open ended interview may have influenced participants to focus on material that they

considered would be seen by others as important or significant. For example, while a participant may have had a strong appreciation of nature, relocating to another country may have been seen as a more appropriate topic to discuss. Participants may also have welcomed the opportunity to talk about pivotal or formative experiences in their lives, and to some extent, the study may have attracted people with such an inclination.

Notably, participants did not cite material possessions or money as sources of appreciation. It is possible that they had only limited personal possessions, or did not view them as particularly valuable. They may have taken such things for granted. Another possibility is they did not consider these to be suitable interview topics, perhaps being wary of being seen as materialistic.

The entire range of phenomena for which people feel grateful no doubt extends beyond those cited in these research findings. This study focussed on the things or experiences participants nominated as beneficial, without being prompted. It also did not ask people to list all the things they considered beneficial, as it was not intended to provide an exhaustive taxonomy. The themes may well be different for other populations, for example, older people, those living in less affluent societies, or people with particular religious beliefs.

Cognitive appraisals underpinning gratitude. The other main research focus was on the underlying cognitive appraisals which determine the experience of gratitude. This was investigated by exploring the reasons people gave for feeling appreciative. Previous literature suggests that when evaluating the experience of prototypical gratitude, three cognitive appraisals are involved: the relative value of the benefit received; the cost of the benefit to the benefactor; and the intention of the benefactor (Wood, Maltby, Stewart, Linley, & Joseph, 2008). Based on interview

data, this model can be adapted to provide a model of the general gratitude (or appreciation) experience. The adapted model is illustrated in Figure 2 below, followed by a brief description of the appraisals involved.

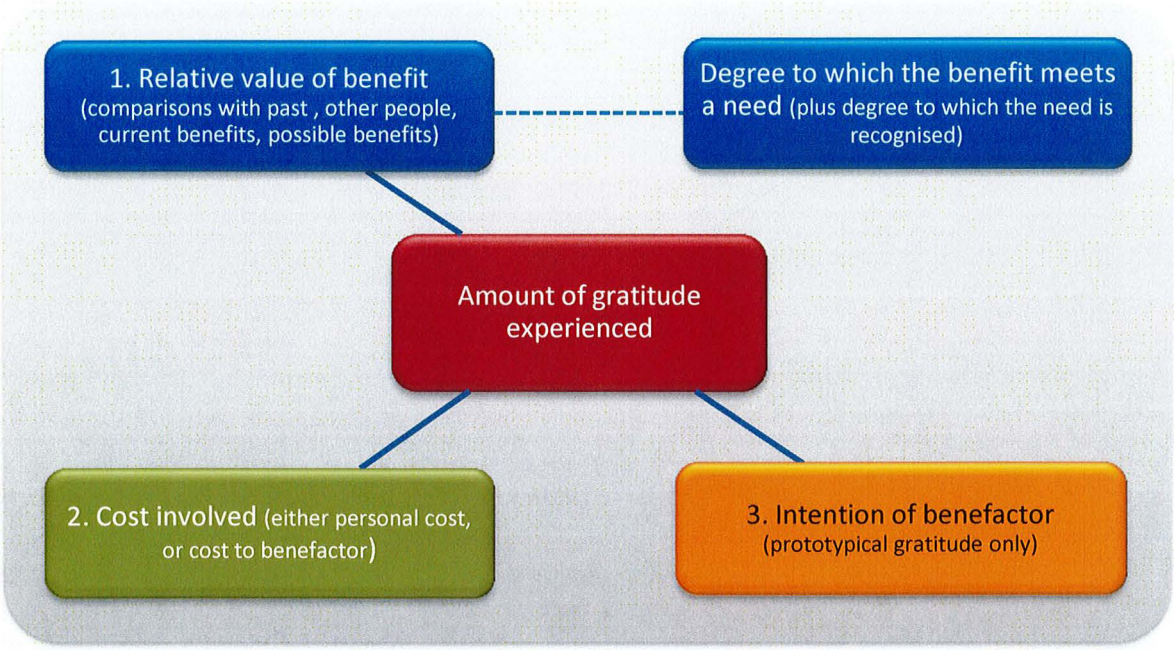

Figure 2. Cognitive appraisals which can underpin the experience of gratitude.

Relative value of the benefit. The most fundamental appraisal associated with gratitude is the recognition of a benefit. Wood, Brown, and Maltby (2011) report that the degree to which a benefit associated with prototypical gratitude is valued is evaluated in relative rather than absolute terms; based on the current findings, this also seemed to be the case for general gratitude. Participants tended to compare their current situation with past ones, or with those of others. People may also judge a benefit by comparing it with other benefits they already have, or even ones they consider possible.

Participant comments also suggest that the value of the benefit is affected by the degree to which the benefit meets a need, an aspect which has does not seem to

have been addressed within the existing research literature. The extent to which the need is consciously recognised may also have an impact.

Cost involved. Interview data from the current study suggest that the prototypical gratitude appraisal of cost to the benefactor can be modified to apply to broad gratitude and appreciation, by including an alternative of "cost to self". Study participants seemed more appreciative of outcomes which involved significant personal investment or cost.

Intention of the benefactor. This third appraisal was not particularly apparent in the interview data, as there was very little focus by participants on prototypical type gratitude experiences.

While this adaptation of Wood et al's (2008) model is not based on any formal analyses, it seems consistent with the interview data. In order for the model to provide a valid representation of the wider gratitude experience, additional research would be required to test, and or further develop the model.

Changes in gratitude over time. Interview data reveal that the experience of gratitude in relation to a particular experience or thing can change over time – participants often indicated they had become more grateful, or were grateful in hindsight. Such changes can be explained using the adapted model above: as cognitive appraisals change (in relation to cost, need, relative value), so does the gratitude experience. This highlights the importance of understanding the underlying gratitude cognitions, and has implications for gratitude interventions (see below).

Defining and measuring gratitude. Despite the absence of the terms gratitude and appreciation in the study title or information about the study, both terms were used frequently by participants throughout the interviews. Consistent with previous research, participants tended to use the term gratitude in a general

rather than prototypical sense. Their use of the term was consistent with the broad definition adopted by the current study: noticing and ascribing a positive value to an event, an experience, a person, a behaviour or an object, deriving a benefit, and experiencing a positive emotional response.

Although the current study is not directly impacted by the inconsistencies in how gratitude (and appreciation) researchers define the terms, there is clear need for a consistent definition. This is particularly relevant for research in which the distinction between prototypical and broad gratitude is important. Ideally the overall field would be referred to as "appreciation", with gratitude used to represent prototypical gratitude, as sub-category of appreciation, as per the approach by Adler and Fagley (2005).

A clear and consistently adopted definition of gratitude would provide a solid basis for creating more informative gratitude measures. Such measures could reflect different aspects of gratitude described by McCullough et al. (2002), including intensity, span, and frequency. Measures could also assess gratitude in regard to common sources or domains of gratitude. As far as possible, measures should attempt to minimise the impact of socially desirable responding, and avoid the likelihood of participants adopting a particular response set if required to provide responses for a list of questionnaire items. Additionally, measures need to be sensitive enough to track changes in gratitude over time.

Well-being and gratitude interventions. The aim of gratitude interventions is usually to improve individual well-being. As discussed previously, targeting gratitude also has the potential to mitigate mental health disorders such as depression, and PTSD. Recent gratitude interventions attempt to increase trait gratitude by encouraging people to become more aware of things for which they

could be grateful ("span"). Findings from the current study may assist in developing more tailored interventions, for example, specifically targeting common gratitude sources/domains for which an individual is currently not particularly grateful. An alternative approach would be to target the cognitive appraisals which underpin gratitude (described above), for example, by having participants deliberately reflect on the value of what they currently have through comparisons with the past or with others, becoming more aware of their own needs and how these are currently being met, and to reflect on the cost (personal or other) associated with the experiences and things in their lives.

Limitations and future directions. The current project involved only a small sample of UTAS undergraduate psychology students, who elected to participate in the research. As such, the findings may not generalise to a wider population. While undergraduate participants may be assumed to have only limited life experience, the interviews revealed otherwise, with wide ranging experiences reported, including developing a brain tumour, immigrating to Australia, travelling overseas, marrying, having children, and either currently working, or having spent time in the workforce before returning to study. For reasons outlined previously, demographic information such as age, domestic situation, and relationship status was not collected, and as such, it was unfortunately not possible to consider these factors in relation to participant responses.

Several suggestions for future research have already been made above. In terms of extending the work of the present study, possibilities include conducting similar open ended interviews with a larger community sample, while collecting broad demographic data. A Grounded Theory approach with saturation sampling could be utilised to further explore themes relating to gratitude sources, and the

cognitive appraisals which underpin gratitude. This approach could also be used to develop the modified model of gratitude proposed in the current research, or develop and test an alternative one. A more sensitive and theory based measure of gratitude could then be developed, which could assist with assessing the efficacy of gratitude interventions, and provide a better understanding of the relationship with well-being.

Summary. Gratitude research is a relatively new and rapidly expanding field. It currently lacks a clear definitional base and strong underlying theory, and is typically quantified by limited self report questionnaire measures. The current research represents the first published study to utilise open ended interviews and a qualitative approach to investigate the nature of gratitude.

To reduce the possibility of biased responding (including socially desirable responding), the study did not explicitly use either the term gratitude or appreciation. Thematic analysis of individual interviews revealed three broad themes representing gratitude sources: relationships, experiencing adversity, and self development pursuits. Although not an initial aim of the project, exploration of the cognitive attributions underlying participants' experience of gratitude enabled an existing model of prototypical gratitude to be modified and expanded, to account for the experience of broad gratitude. The model is able to account for changes in gratitude over time.

Gratitude (and appreciation) research represent important areas of study, due to the strong links with well-being and mental health. Findings from the current study have the potential to contribute towards the development of sound theory of broad gratitude, improved measures for its quantification, and more targeted interventions for increasing gratitude, with the potential for improving well-being.

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Appendix A

The Gratitude Questionnaire-Six Item Form (GQ-6)

Using the scale below as a guide, write a number beside each statement to indicate how much
you agree with it.

1 = strongly disagree
2 = disagree
3 = slightly disagree
4 = neutral
5 = slightly agree
6 = agree
7 = strongly agree

____1. I have so much in life to be thankful for.

____2. If I had to list everything that I felt grateful for, it would be a very long list.

____3. When I look at the world, I don't see much to be grateful for.*

____4. I am grateful to a wide variety of people.

____5. As I get older I find myself more able to appreciate the people, events, and situations that have been part of my life history.

____6. Long amounts of time can go by before I feel grateful to something or someone.*

*Items 3 and 6 are reverse-scored.

Appendix B

Appreciation Scale (AS)

Table 5
Items Comprising Eight Subscales of Appreciation: HARPSGLI

Item	Scale (No. of Items)
	"Have" Focus (10)
6	I am very thankful for my degree of physical health.
7	I count my blessings for what I have in this world.
15	I remind myself how fortunate I am to have the privileges and opportunities I have encountered in life.
17	I reflect on how fortunate I am to have basic things in life like food, clothing, and shelter.
22	I really notice and acknowledge the good things I get in life.
46	I am content with what I have.
54	It is important to appreciate things such as health, family, and friends.
55	Although I don't have everything I want, I am thankful for what I have.
63	I remind myself to think about the good things I have in my life.
65	I appreciate my degree of success in life so far.
	Awe (6)
2	I get caught up in the wonderment of life.
20	I have moments when I realize how fortunate I am to be alive.
25	I reflect on how lucky I am to be alive.
36	I feel that it is a miracle to be alive.
47	I feel a positive, emotional connection to nature.
61	When I see natural beauty like Niagara Falls, I feel like a child who is awestruck.
	Ritual (6)
24	I stop to give thanks for my food before I eat.
50	I give thanks for something at least once a day.
4	I do things to remind myself to be thankful.
21	I perform rituals (i.e. pray or "say grace before a meal").
56	I use personal or religious rituals to remind myself to be thankful for things.
69	I believe it is important to remind myself to be thankful for things on a consistent basis (i.e. daily, weekly, or monthly).
	Present Moment (1)
8	I enjoy the little things around me like the trees, the wind, animals, sounds, light, etc.

(Continued)

Table 5 (Cont.)

Item	Scale (No. of Items)
72	I stop and enjoy my life as it is.
26	I notice things like the first flowers of spring.
67	I recognize and acknowledge the positive value and meaning of events in my life.
12	I remind myself to appreciate the things around me.
14	I place special, positive meaning into neutral activities like taking a walk, a shower, or a nap.
78	When I stop and notice the things around me I feel good and content.
	Self/Social Comparison (5)
9	I reflect on the worst times in my life to help me realize how fortunate I am now.
11	I think of people who are less fortunate than I am to help me feel more satisfied with my circumstances.
31	When I swerve to avoid a car accident, I feel relieved that I am ok.
51	When I drive by the scene of a car accident, it reminds me to feel thankful that I am safe.
76	When I see someone less fortunate than myself, I realize how lucky I am.
	Gratitude (10)
5	I say "please" and "thank you."
30	I notice the sacrifices that my friends make for me.
32R	Food, clothing, and shelter are basic needs that I do not need to be grateful for because I am entitled to them.
37	I acknowledge when people go out of their way for me.
39	I say "please" and "thank you" to indicate my appreciation.
49	When a friend gives me a ride somewhere when he or she doesn't have to, I really appreciate it.
59	I say "thank you" in a restaurant when people bring my food to express my appreciation for their help.
60	I am very fortunate for the opportunity to receive an education.
62	I value the sacrifices that my parents (or guardians) have made (and/or make) for me.
71R	Anything that my parents (or guardians) have done for me can be attributed to their responsibility as parents (or guardians), and I do not need to be thankful because that was their job.

(Continued)

Table 5 (Cont.)

Item	Scale (No. of Items)
	Loss/Adversity (8)
79	I appreciate the things I have now, because I know that anything I have can be taken away from me at any given time.
40	When something bad happens to me, I think of worse situations I could be in to make myself feel better.
44	I use my own experiences of loss to help me pay more attention to what I have now.
70	If I were to lose something I cared about, I would focus on how lucky I was to have had it.
64	The thought of people close to me dying some day in the future makes me care more about them now.
29	Experiences of loss have taught me to value life.
74	**The problems and challenges I face in my life help me to value the positive aspects of my life.**
77	**Thinking about dying reminds me to live every day to the fullest.**
	Interpersonal (5)
1	I acknowledge to others how important they are to me.
16	I let others know how much I appreciate them.
10	I recognize the value of my time with friends.
23	I reflect on how important my friends are to me.
18	**I remind myself to appreciate my family.**

Note. The 18 items of the short form of the Appreciation Scale are indicated in bold. Items numbered 1–25 use the frequency rating scale; items 26–81 use the Likert rating scale. An "R" after the item number indicates it is reverse scored. Numbers in parentheses after the subscale name represent the number of items in the subscale.

Appendix C

Gratitude Resentment and Appreciation Test (GRAT)

Indicate your agreement/disagreement on a five point scale (1=I strongly disagree, 5=I strongly agree)

1. I couldn't have gotten where I am today without the help of many people.
2.* I think that life has handed me a short stick.
3.* It sure seems like others get a lot more benefits in life than I do.
4.* I never seem to get the breaks that other people do.
5. Often I'm just amazed at how beautiful the sunsets are.
6. Life has been good to me.
7.* There never seems to be enough to go around and I'm always coming up short.
8. Often I think, "What a privilege it is to be alive."
9. Oftentimes I have been overwhelmed at the beauty of nature.
10. I feel grateful for the education I have received.
11. Many people have given me valuable wisdom throughout my life that has been important to my success.
12.* It seems like people have frequently tried to impede my progress.
13. Although I think it's important to feel good about your accomplishments, I think that it's also important to remember how others have contributed to my accomplishments.
14.* I really don't think that I've gotten all the good things that I deserve in life.
15. Every fall I really enjoy watching the leaves change colors.
16. Although I'm basically in control of my life, I can't help but think about all those who have supported me and helped me along the way.
17. Part of really enjoying something good is being thankful for that thing.
18. Sometimes I find myself overwhelmed by the beauty of a musical piece.
19. I'm basically very thankful for the parenting that was provided to me.
20.* I've gotten where I am today because of my own hard work, despite the lack of any help or support.
21.* During the holidays, I never seemed to get as many presents or presents that were as good as others received.
22. Sometimes I think, "Why am I so privileged so as to be born into the situation I was born into?"
23. One of my favorite times of the year is Thanksgiving.
24. I believe that I am a very fortunate person.
25. I think that it's important to "Stop and smell the roses."
26.* More bad things have happened to me in my life than I deserve.
27. I really enjoy the changing seasons.

28.* Because of what I've gone through in my life, I really feel like the world owes me something.
29. I believe that the things in life that are really enjoyable are just as available to me as they are to Bill Gates or Donald Trump.
30. I love to sit and watch the snow fall.
31.* I believe that I've had more than my share of bad things come my way.
32.* Although I think that I'm morally better than most, I haven't gotten my just reward in life.
33. After eating I often pause and think, "What a wonderful meal."
34. I really enjoy a crackling fire on a cold winter's day.
35. I think that it's important to sit down every once in a while and "count your blessings."
36. I think it's important to enjoy the simple things in life.
37.* I basically feel like life has ripped me off.
38. I feel deeply appreciative for the things others have done for me in my life.
39.* I feel that "someone up there" doesn't like me.
40. The simple pleasures of life are the best pleasures of life.
41. I love the green of spring.
42.* For some reason I never seem to get the breaks that others get.
43. I think it's important to appreciate each day that you are alive.
44. I'm really thankful for friends and family.

* *Indicates item is reverse scored.*

Appendix D

Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet, 1

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET
Factors which Influence Beneficial Experiences

Invitation
You are invited to participate in a research study into factors which influence positive life experiences.

The study is being conducted by:

Sally Cooper	Prof. Douglas Paton	Dr Greg Hannan
PhD candidate	Personal Chair	Senior Lecturer/ Head of School
School of Psychology	School of Psychology	School of Psychology

1. 'What is the purpose of this study?'

The purpose is to investigate how people evaluate their life experiences.

2. 'Why have I been invited to participate in this study?'

You are eligible to participate in this study because the subject matter is relevant to everyone. Finding out about people's own personal views and experiences is what's important for the study.

3. 'What does this study involve?'

Participation will involve an initial one-to-one confidential interview either in person, or by phone, lasting up to one hour with Sally Cooper (PhD student). The focus will be on how you view your life experiences. Interview questions are not pre-set, so there will be a reasonable amount of flexibility in what's discussed. You won't be asked to discuss anything that makes you uncomfortable in any way.

It is important to understand that your involvement is this study is completely voluntary. While we would be pleased to have you participate, we respect your right to decline. There will be no consequences to you if you decide not to participate. If you decide to discontinue participation at any time, you may do so without providing an explanation. All information will be treated in a confidential manner, and your name will not be used in any publication arising out of the research.

Interviews will recorded on a digital audio recording device for subsequent analysis. The audio files and data analysis files will be stored on the University's secure network drive,. Your consent form and any other hard copy information (e.g., notes taken by the interviewer) will be kept secure in a locked cabinet in the office of Sally Cooper. Only the three researchers listed above will be able to access this material. After a period of five years, all audio files, raw data files, and hard copy files will be permanently deleted.

4. Are there any possible benefits from participation in this study?

While there may be no obvious direct benefits to you for participating, the information you provide will contribute towards a better understanding of how different people feel about the things they have in their lives.

5. Are there any possible risks from participation in this study?

There are no specific risks anticipated with participation in this study. However, if you find the interview causes you to become distressed, we can arrange for you to see a counsellor at no expense to you.

6. What if I have questions about this research?

If you would like to discuss any aspect of this study please feel free to contact Sally Cooper (sally.cooper@utas.edu.au; 03 6226 7462), Prof. Douglas Paton (Douglas.Paton@utas.edu.au; 03 6324 3193), or Dr Greg Hannan (G.Hannan@utas.edu.au; 03 6324 3267). We would be happy to discuss any aspect of the research with you. Once we have analysed the information, a summary of our findings will be made available on the UTas School of Psychology website: http://fcms.its.utas.edu.au/scieng/psychol/index.asp). You are welcome to contact us at that time to discuss any issue relating to the research study.

7. Who can I contact if I have any concerns?

If you have any concerns of an ethical nature or complaints about the manner in which the project is being conducted, you can contact the Executive Officer of the Human Research Ethics Committee (Tasmania) Network. The Ethics Executive Officer can be contacted on 03 6226 7479. Email address is human.ethics@utas.edu.au.

This study has been approved by the University of Tasmania Social Science/ Humanities Research Ethics Committee.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this study.
If you wish to take part in it, please sign the attached consent form.
This information sheet is for you to keep.

Appendix E

Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet *Code:* _____

UTAS
FACULTY OF SCIENCE, ENGINEERING & TECHNOLOGY
School of Psychology

CONSENT FORM

Title of Project: Factors which Influence Beneficial Experiences

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1. I have read and understood the 'Information Sheet' for this project.
2. The reasons for the study, what it will involve, and possible effects of the study have been explained to me.
3. I understand that the study involves being interviewed for up to one hour about factors which influence positive life experiences. I won't be asked to discuss anything that I'm not comfortable with.
4. I understand that although there are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in the study, if for some reason, the interview causes me distress, I have been given details on who to contact for support.
5. I understand that all research data will be securely stored on the University of Tasmania premises for five years, and will then be destroyed.
6. Any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.
7. I agree that research data gathered from me for the study may be published provided that I cannot be identified as a participant.
8. I understand that the researchers will maintain my identity confidential and that any information I supply to the researchers will be used only for the purposes of the research.
9. I agree to participate in this investigation and understand that I may withdraw at any time without any effect, and if I so wish, may request that any data I have supplied to date be withdrawn from the research.

Name of Participant: _____

Signature: _____ Date: ___ / ___ / 2008

Statement by Investigator

☐ I have explained the project & the implications of participation in it to this volunteer and I believe that the consent is informed and that he/she understands the implications of participation

If the Investigator has not had an opportunity to talk to participants prior to them participating, the following must be ticked.

☐ The participant has received the Information Sheet where my details have been provided so participants have the opportunity to contact me prior to consenting to participate in this project.

Name of investigator: **Sally Cooper (PhD Student)**

Signature of investigator: _____ Date: ___ / ___ / 2008
